



---

## Knowledge of Things in Early and Early Medieval China and its Implications for Cultural Continuity

Zhinan Chen

University of Washington, Seattle, USA

### ABSTRACT

Classical Chinese culture is often referred to as a model for having maintained itself without any significant interruption in its tradition from its earliest written records. Such cultural continuity is indebted to the availability and intellectual durability of its early literature, as well as a relatively stable classical language that allowed the literature to remain accessible. In view of this perceived cultural continuity, often too readily taken as a given, much of the significant changes taking place under the surface have gone unnoticed. The flexibility and tenacity that this culture had displayed during its long course of transmission, as a result, have largely gone underestimated. In this paper I will bring into focus the notion of *wu* 物 ‘thing(s), object(s), materiality’ as the basic constituent of a perceived physical reality. I will document how the way in which men perceive and engage with *wu* changed over time, and the way in which the impact from these changes in turn give shape to the history of Chinese culture and thought from the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup> century–221 BCE) to the years just before the Tang reunification in the seventh century.

### KEYWORDS

*wu* “external things”/ “physical reality”, cultural continuity, epistemology, early medieval intellectual history

## 1. Introduction

In the first part of his accomplished undertaking of Chinese intellectual history, titled *Knowledge, Thought, and Belief before the Seventh Century CE* 七世紀前的知識思想與信仰, Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光 seeks to present a more dynamic and nuanced form of cultural continuity than has been previously shown by introducing the realm of general knowledge, thought and belief—a common explanatory background—to the traditional narrative of intellectual history.<sup>1</sup> Ge's pursuit of “a continuous line of reasoning in intellectual history,” by his own reckoning, is in keeping with Crane Brinton's assertion that intellectual history is a “retrospective sociology of knowledge,” as well as with Benjamin Schwartz's pronouncement that intellectual history should involve “men's conscious responses to the situations in which they find themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

In light of Ge's instructive approach to intellectual history I will bring into focus the notion of *wu* 物 “thing(s), object(s), materiality,” the basic constituent of the perceived physical reality, to contextualize the quest of cultural continuity from the pre-imperial to the early medieval period. The concept of *wu* is important in the history of Chinese thought; the versatility, all-inclusiveness, as well as its predisposition towards categorization and correlation have been competently discussed both within and beyond the field of Chinese philological thought.<sup>3</sup> In this paper I will document how the

way in which men perceive and engage with *wu* changed over the time, and how the way in which the impact from these changes in turn give shape to the history of Chinese culture and thought from the Warring States period (5<sup>th</sup> century–221 BCE) to just before the Tang reunification in the seventh century. I will examine two main questions: 1) how the knowledge, thought, and belief of *wu* passed down from ancient China under the auspices of the overall categorizing and correlative explanatory system; and 2) to what extent such a unique explanatory system is responsible for overall continuation of the knowledge, thought, and belief of pre-seventh century China.

## 2. Wu from the beginning

Occurrences of the term *wu* in pre-Han texts show two distinct yet related meanings. On the one hand, *wu* refers to variegated things indiscriminately, as in the terms *wanwu* 萬物 “myriad phenomena,” *shuwu* 庶物 “multitude of beings,” and *shengwu* 生物 “living creatures.” In other early texts, the reference of the word 物 is further qualified by the dichotomy between the self (*wo* 我 or *shen* 身) and the rest of existence (*wu*).

This perceived dichotomy may be seen as one of the indications of transcendence in human consciousness where humans started to see themselves as individuals, to be set against the outside world. Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 observes that in the Warring States period “the world external to the self was beginning to be seen as

<sup>1</sup> Ge Zhaoguang 葛兆光, trans. Michael S. Duke and Josephine Chiu-Duke, *An Intellectual History of China: Knowledge, Thought, and Belief before the Seventh Century CE* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 8–12.

<sup>2</sup> See Ge Zhaoguang, *An Intellectual History of China*, 19–20; 64.

<sup>3</sup> For a survey of the concept of *wu* in the history of Chinese thought, refer to Zhang Dainian 張岱年, Edmund Ryden, trans. and ed., *Key Concepts in*

*Chinese Philosophy* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2002), 65–70. On the *wu*'s correlative predisposition, Cheng Yu-yu, for example, aptly delineates the proscribed correlation between *wu* (external things / physical reality) and lyric expression in Chinese poetic tradition. See Cheng Yu-yu 鄭毓瑜, “Lei yu wu—gudian shiwen de ‘wu’ beijing” 類與物—古典詩文的物背景, *Tsing hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 41 (2011), 3–38.

the origin and source of knowledge.”<sup>4</sup> Qiu’s observation is independent of, and yet, not incompatible with Karl Jaspers’ (1883–1969) theorizing of the term “transcendence” as a momentous intellectual breakthrough that took place around 500 BCE among the world’s major civilizations.<sup>5</sup>

It is to this theoretical breakthrough in “Axial-Age” China that Yü Ying-shih 余英時 traces the fountainhead of Chinese intellectual history. This intellectual breakthrough, he argues, was predicated on a gradual crumbling and eventual collapse of the authority of spiritual experts, variously known as *wu* 巫 “sprit-medium,” *bu* 卜 “diviner,” *shenshi* 神仕 “minister of deity,” *zhu* 祝 “invoker during sacrificial rites,” and *shi* 史 “astrologer,” “scribe,” or, more generally, “the custodian of miscellaneous written documents.”<sup>6</sup> This group of professionals, serving as the medium between the human realm and heaven, monopolized the production and transmission of knowledge in pre-Axial Age China.<sup>7</sup>

The marginalization of the spiritual experts from the center of the intellectual discourse about which Yü Ying-shih has speculated, can

perhaps be corroborated in the following *Zuo zhuan* anecdote:

In 541 BCE (Zhaogong 1) the Lord of Jin came down with an inexplicable ailment. The court diviner (*bu*) judged that the ailment had been inflicted on the lord by two malign spirits, whose names were unknown even to the *shi*, the custodian of written documents. Zichan 子產 (d. 522 BCE) from the neighboring state came to visit the lord of Jin. When consulted about the matter, Zichan gave a detailed account of these two spirits, something that the court scribe failed to produce. He then questioned the expertise of the court diviner in asserting that the lord’s ailment stemmed from 1) the lord’s excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure being at odds with the course of nature; and 2) the lord’s inner chamber containing women from the same clan as the lord, a violation of the sanctified cultural customs.<sup>8</sup>

The one significant novelty of Zichan’s “diagnosis” is his introduction of rules of conduct and morality into a causal correlation between phenomena of the natural and human realms. This not only marks a departure from the expertise of the spiritual experts but also

<sup>4</sup> Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, “Shuo ‘gewu’—yi xian Qin renshilun de fazhanguocheng wei beijing” 說“格物”—以先秦認識論的發展過程為背景 in *Wenshi conggao* 文史叢稿 (Shanghai: Shanghai yuandong chubanshe, 1996), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Jaspers’ “Axial Age” theory is a framework for thinking comparatively about intellectual processes that occurred almost simultaneously and independently of one another throughout the world’s major civilizations. He dated the “axis of history” to approximately 500 BCE and the axial age to the period 800–200 BCE. See Karl Jaspers, Michael Bullock, trans., *Origin and Goal of History* (1953; rpt. London: Routledge, 2011), 4. See also Ingolf U. Dalferth, “The Idea of Transcendence,” *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, eds. Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 146–88.

<sup>6</sup> Yü Ying-shih 余英時, *Tian ren zhiji—Zhongguo gudai sixiang qiyuan shitan* 天人之際—中國古代思想起源試探 (Taipei: Lianjing chuban youjian gongsi, 2014), 32–36.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 41.322. Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, David Schaberg, trans., *Zuo Tradition / Zuozhuan: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals”* (Seattle and London: University of Washington, 2016), 1324–27. In the *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語, Confucius is seen echoing the lord of Jin’s evaluation, saying that “Zichan served as a gracious lord for his people, and adopted a pan-physical intellectual outlook when it comes to learning” 夫子產於民為惠主，於學為博物。See *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語, *Sibu congkan*, 3.20a–b.

deems the knowledge in their hands simply irrelevant.

Zichan's holistic approach and comprehensive command of knowledge earned him the epitaph "the gentleman of *bowu*" 博物君子.<sup>9</sup> This is the *locus classicus* of the term *bowu*, which I propose to render as "to become aware of the encompassing reality."<sup>10</sup> It takes a rationally minded gentleman (*junzi* 君子) to view the world external to the self as the source of knowledge and to take it upon himself to seek "the encompassing reality" that existed beyond time and space.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate encompassing reality betokens the Way (*dao* 道), the collectively acknowledged overarching existence that various schools of thought of the time had vigorously sought after.

He who embodies the ultimate encompassing reality is thus the embodiment of the Way (*ti Dao zhe* 體道者). On such a person the *Huainanzi* writes: "When things bring themselves to him, he knows their proper names; when affairs come about, he knows how to react accordingly" 物來而名, 事來而

應.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, knowing the proper names of things and the proper ways to respond refers not to one's acquisition of specific knowledge itself but to one's unimpeded intellect and imposing command of knowledge.

An unimpeded intellect and imposing command of knowledge of one who embodies the Way is elaborated on in the third century BCE text *Xunzi* as follows:

He sits in his chamber yet sees all within the four seas. He dwells in today yet judges what is long ago and far away in time. He comprehensively observes the myriad things and knows their true dispositions. He inspects and examines order and disorder and discerns their measures. He sets straight Heaven and Earth, and arranges and makes useful the myriad things. He institutes great order, and the whole world is encompassed therein.<sup>13</sup>

坐於室而見四海, 處於今而論久遠. 疏觀萬物而知其情, 參稽治亂而通其度, 經緯天地而材官萬物, 制割大理而宇宙裏矣.

<sup>9</sup> See *Chunqiu Zuo zhuan zhengyi*, 41.322.

<sup>10</sup> Sima Qian adopted this phrase to sing the praises of Zichan's contemporary and fellow statesman, Jizi 季子 of Wu. He writes: "For the humane heart of Jizi of Yanling, the aspiration to propriety is inexhaustible, in seeing a minute detail the pure and the impure can be known. Alas, what a gentleman of broad learning and *bowu* he was." 延陵季子之仁心, 慕義無窮, 見微而知清濁. 嗚呼, 又何其閱覽博物君子也. See *Shi ji*, 31.1475. By tradition Confucius himself is often seen identifying otherwise unheard-of objects or phenomena and making informative observations about the encounter. In the *Kongcongzi* 孔叢子 (The Kong family masters' anthology) Confucius is spoken of as a sage for "his general knowledge being inexhaustible" (*bowu buqiong* 博物不窮). See *Kongcongzi* 孔叢子, *Sibu congkan*, 1.1a. Yoav Ariel, trans. *The K'ung Family Masters' Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 75. Similar anecdotes of some of the highest profile statesmen of the time, such as the Duke of Zhou, Guan Zhong, and Yanzi are also recorded in pre-Han and Han texts.

<sup>11</sup> This sense is embedded in the cultural memory among intellectuals even well after the Axial Period. Cui Shi 崔寔 (d. 170), for example, opens his monograph on government administration titled *Zheng lun* 政論 with the following statement: "Rulers since the time of Emperor Yao and Emperor Shun, to the age of Tang [of Shang] and Wu [of Zhou], all availed themselves of aides with enlightened perception and ministers of *bowu*" 自堯舜之帝, 湯武之王, 皆賴明哲之佐, 博物之臣. See *Han shu*, 52.1725. Also see the reconstructed *Zheng lun* in Yan Kejun 嚴可均, ed. and comp., *Quan shanggu Sandai Qin Han Sanguo Liuchao wen* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1958), 46.1a–13a.

<sup>12</sup> See He Ning 何寧, ed. and comm., *Huainanzi jishi* 淮南子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1998), 10.705.

<sup>13</sup> See Wang Xianqian 王先謙, ed. and comm., *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1988), 15.397. Eric L. Hutton, *Xunzi the Complete Text* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press), 229.

The description of the one who embodies the Way in the *Xunzi* would seem completely familiar to anyone who is aware of Jaspers' depiction of enlightened individuals "capable of contrasting himself inwardly with the entire universe,"<sup>14</sup> who emerged around 500 BCE all over the world to set out on a quest for "the infinitude of the Comprehensive."<sup>15</sup>



Among other early Chinese texts that share the same quest for "the infinitude of the Comprehensive" or the "Way," the "Daxue" 大學 (The highest order of cultivation) chapter of the *Li ji* 禮記 (Record of Rites) set out to "come near to the Way" 近道 *jindao* in an orderly manner.<sup>16</sup> The opening passage makes explicit that the path that leads to the ultimate Way all comes down to one thing—the practice of *gewu* 格物.<sup>17</sup> Such a vocal concept, however, is not further elaborated in the rest of the text; nor is it attested elsewhere among pre-Han and Han texts. The consensus seems to be that the semantic property of the less familiar term *ge* is well situated within the scope ranging from "looking into" (*cha* 察), "arriving at" (*zhi* 至), to "coming in contact with" (*ji* 際).<sup>18</sup> What is noticeable is that the action asserted upon the exterior world, known as *gewu*, is conceived in the text as the point of

departure and the frame of reference for putting oneself, one's household, and the entire society in perfect order, and ultimately brings one closer to the Way.

### 3. *Wu* under the auspices of the empire

Both the quest of comprehending the Way (*bowu*) or drawing oneself closer to it (*gewu*) were the intellectual antecedents of a new pursuit for "all-encompassing-ness," defined and driven by the new concept of a unified empire. To establish the textual representation of the entire reality (i.e., *wu*) within the radius of empire, or a clearly demarcated portion thereof, was an effort not only to facilitate an Imperial administrative apparatus but also to bear out the cultural rationale behind the empire. As Mark Edward Lewis aptly observes, "completeness or totality" in the early imperial period was deemed "the highest form of textual authority."<sup>19</sup>

One of the early attempts to have a commanding and comprehensive grasp of the totality of reality is the "Shu" 書 (Monographs) section of Sima Qian's 司馬遷 (145–ca. 86 BCE) *Shi ji* 史記 (Records of the Historian). This section primarily concerns itself with impersonal matters and thus sets itself apart from imperial annals, tables, and biographies in the *Shi ji*. Each of the eight "Shu" chapters surveys a general topic that is fundamental to

<sup>14</sup> Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>16</sup> See *Li ji zhengyi* 禮記正義, *Shisanjing zhushu*, 60.445.

<sup>17</sup> The term became a topic of dispute in Neo-Confucianism in late medieval period. The proper understanding of the phrase pertains to a range of epistemological issues, from the origin and nature of knowledge, to how knowledge can be acquired. For a summary of this focus of controversy, see Zhang, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, 2002, 451–60. For the implied ontological issues, refer to Andrew Plaks' entry on "Gewu zhizhi" in *Routledgecurzon*

*Encyclopedia of Confucianism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 226–27. See also A. C. Graham, *The Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle: Open Court Publishing Company, 1989), 134.

<sup>18</sup> See D. C. Lau, "A note on 'ke wu' 格物," *BSOAS* 30 (1967): 353–57; Plaks, "Gewu zhizhi," 227; Liu Shipai 劉師培, *Zuo'an ji* 左龔集 (Shanghai: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1997), 1211–12. See also Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭, "Shuo 'gewu'" 說"格物", 3–15.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Edward Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 287.

one's grasping of the structure and operation of the world.

Following the framework of the "Shu," the knowledge of the exterior world was reconfigured by Ban Gu 班固 (32–92 CE) under the title "Zhi" 志 (Treatises) in the *Han shu* 漢書 (History of the Han) more than a century later.<sup>20</sup> Ban Gu's compilation of the "Zhi" of the *Han shu* was a product of Western Han state-sponsored scholarship, seen most prominently in the work of Liu Xiang 劉向 (77–8 BCE). It was Liu Xiang who situated the sphere of knowledge firmly in the textual realm.

In 26 BCE, Liu Xiang took on the formidable task of editing some tens of thousands of manuscripts held in the imperial library.<sup>21</sup> Liu Xiang, with the assistance of his son Liu Xin 劉歆 (d. 23 CE) and a number of other scholars, established critical recensions of the texts with stable physical shape and necessary bibliographical information (author, title, table

of contents).<sup>22</sup> In the course of sorting out texts in the imperial library, Liu Xiang noticed numerous cases of correspondence between impersonal phenomena and their respective worldly implications scattered among various texts. According to Ban Gu,

He [Liu Xiang] collected records of auspicious tokens, portentous events, calamities and strange phenomena dating from remote antiquity through the periods of the Spring and Autumn and Six States until Qin and Han times. He traced and followed the sources and course of the events, linked them with their calamitous or favorable outcomes, outlined their prognosticative verifications, and classified them under different categories, each category identified by a separated heading.<sup>23</sup>

集合上古以來歷春秋六國至秦漢符瑞災異之記，推跡行事，連傳禍福，著其占驗，比類相從，各有條目。

<sup>20</sup> Ban Gu changed its name from "Shu" (a generic term for texts) to "Zhi" (specifically documents or records). Ban Gu combined treatises of "Lü" 律 (musical scale) and "Li" 歷 (calendar), "Li" 禮 (rites) and "Yue" 樂 (music) and created four new treatises. Ban Gu's "Zhi" established itself as an important genre in historiography and served as the prototype of systematized and institutionalized knowledge throughout the early imperial and early medieval periods. Towards the end of the Later Han, Cai Yong (133–192), in collaboration with other scholars, worked on the compiling the history of the Later Han that is commonly known as *Dongguan Han ji* 東觀漢記. In 179–180, Cai, in exile, submitted a petition and copy of ten treatises for the compilation of history that he had been working on. Two versions of this letter have been preserved. See *Hou Han shu* 後漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), 60B.2004 comm.; *Hou Han shu*, "Zhi" 3.3082–84 comm. Sima Biao 司馬彪 (240–ca. 306; alt. 241?–305? alt. ca. 247–306) sequel to the history of the Later Han, titled *Xu Han shu* 續漢書 also included ten treatises, which were later incorporated in Fan Ye's 范曄 (398–446) *Hou*

*Han shu*. For a detailed study the treatises of the Later Han, see B. J. Mansvelt Beck, *The Treatises of Later Han: Their Author, Sources, Contents and Place in Chinese Historiography* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990), 8–12, 41–46, 97–103.

<sup>21</sup> "Yiwen zhi" of the *Han shu* lists more than 13,000 *juan* of books. See *Han shu* 漢書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 30.1781.

<sup>22</sup> Liu Xiang and his team also created a bibliographic account (*lu* 錄) of each book to document the textual collation notes (*jiaochou* 校讎), textual criticism (*jiaokan* 校勘), and scholarly critiques. See Sun Deqian 孫德謙, *Liu Xiang jiaochou xue zuanwei* 劉向校讎學纂微 (Hong Kong: Wencui ge, 1972). Liu Xiang and his son prepared a summary of the information about various texts that they had collected and examined, under the title of *Qi lie* 七略 (Seven summaries). It was this report submitted to the throne in 5 BCE, three years after Liu Xiang died, that Ban Gu subsequently incorporated as the "Bibliographical Treatise" of the *Han shu*. See *Han shu*, 30.1701–02.

<sup>23</sup> *Han shu*, 36.1950.

The records that he compiled were then incorporated into the “Wu xing” 五行 (Five potencies) monograph of the *Han shu*.<sup>24</sup> It was on the basis of Liu Xiang’s extensive work in the imperial library that Ban Gu fleshed out the three other *Han shu* treatises each as a clearly defined portion of the impersonal world.<sup>25</sup>

Liu Xiang’s work has also proven instructive in showing how textual knowledge can be extracted out of context, rendered into discrete pieces, only to be reassembled for a new compositional purpose. The practice of harvesting materials from a plethora of texts of varied origins with a view to certain criteria of relevance and arranging them in accordance with a specific editorial scheme had become an established compilation method in the course of Liu Xiang’s work in the imperial library.

The instructive value and enduring legacy of Liu Xiang and his predecessors’ scholarly undertaking could be juxtaposed with the work of distinguished Alexandrian scholars in the Library of Alexandria on the other side of the globe. Like their counterparts in the Han imperial library, Alexandrian scholars poured

themselves into sorting out hundreds of thousands of manuscripts that were housed on the imperial library around the third and second century BCE.<sup>26</sup> As part of their initial work, the scholars devoted much of their energy to studying the ancient texts themselves and produced numerous commentaries and exegetical essays.<sup>27</sup> Others devoted themselves to mining through the texts and excerpting bits of knowledge with a view to various mythographic and paradoxographic criteria.<sup>28</sup>

The fact that knowledge is mined from transmitted texts, as well as the way in which the mined knowledge is being maneuvered speaks to the materiality (*wu*) of knowledge, in that knowledge can be possessed, sorted out, itemized and reconfigured for alternative uses. The legacy of Liu Xiang’s exploitation of knowledge as textual artifact was attested to by the proliferation of treatises of specialized knowledge, categorized compendia, encyclopedic collections, eclectic digests, as

<sup>24</sup> *Han shu*, 21A.979. *Han shu* 36. 1950. The work is titled *Hong fan wu xing zhuan lun* 洪範五行傳, alternatively listed as *Wu xing zhuanji* 五行傳記; see *Han shu* 30.1705.

<sup>25</sup> Ban Gu explicitly acknowledges four treatises that were based on Liu Xiang’s and Liu Xin’s work: Treatises on “Wuxing” (Five agents), “Lüli” (Musical pitches and calendar), “Dili” (Geography), and “Yiwen” (Bibliography). The “Lü li zhi” incorporated Liu Xin’s *San tong li* 三統歷 (Triple concordance system), which was in turn, based on Liu Xiang’s *Wu ji lun* 五紀論 (Disquisition on the five sequences of time), which is now lost. See *Han shu*, 21A. 979. Also see Michael Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary of the Qin, Former Han and Xin Periods (221 BC - AD 24)* (Brill: Brill 2000), 374; Christopher Cullen, *Heavenly Numbers: Astronomy & Authority in Early Imperial China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 111–12. Liu Xiang’s account of the territorial aspect or division of the empire was used as the basis for part of the “Dili zhi.” See *Han shu*, 28B.1640. Also see

Loewe, *A Biographical Dictionary*, 374. The “Bibliographical Treatise” was an abridgement of the *Qi lue* 七略, a detailed catalogue of the imperial library prepared by Liu Xin based on the work of his father Liu Xiang. See *Han shu*, 30.1701.

<sup>26</sup> Marcus Walsh, “Theories of Text, Editorial Theory, and Textual Criticism,” *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, eds. Michael F. Suarez and H. R. Woudhuysen, E-book, Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> This in turn became the early foundation of Western philology and textual scholarship. See Marcus Walsh, “Theories of Text, Editorial Theory, and Textual Criticism.” Carolyn Higbie, “Hellenistic Mythographers,” *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>28</sup> From this exercise developed a number of new textual traditions, most prominently, mythography and paradoxography. See Higbie, “Hellenistic Mythographers,” 238–39.

well as *leishu* 類書 (literally “classified compilation”) in the early medieval period.<sup>29</sup>

#### 4. *Wu* in the Early Medieval Period

The collapse of the Han empire in 220 CE not only marked the end of political unification but also declared the finale of a cultural epoch illustrious under the auspices of the empire. The early medieval period was a period where cultural legacy had become diffuse and multiform in the absence of traditionally established and recognized authorities for texts. Even while the Han empire remained a remembrance and an enduring cultural aspiration, without an overarching empire poised to unify the entire world in a single entity the knowledge once fixed in place was then turned loose. Both *bowu* and *gewu* underwent subtle but meaningful changes after the fall of Han.

##### a) *Bowu*: From an “Unimpeded Intellect” to “Pan-physical Knowledge”

The most immediate attestation of the semantic shift of the term *bowu* is Zhang Hua’s (232–300) *Bowu zhi* 博物志 “A treatise of a broad array of things.”<sup>30</sup> It is a compilation of entries of varying length drawn from earlier writings and categorized into different subject headings, ranging from natural phenomena and geographical information to folklore and

anecdotal history.<sup>31</sup> The knowledge conveyed in the compilation is entirely predicated on Zhang Hua’s own exhaustive familiarity with the existing texts. The entire compilation also appears firmly tied to the material realm; Zhang Hua shows no intention or effort to go beyond this concrete world of time and space.

Given its dense association with the material realm, it is easy to assume that the knowledge that Zhang Hua mustered is intended to inform exhaustively on its own and that the term *bowu* embodied in the title simply refers to an all-sweeping familiarity with things and phenomena of this world. But this is not the case. Zhang Hua’s vision for his book, though firmly grounded on the material reality, is by no means exclusively confined to it.

In his preface to the “Summary of the geography,” the first chapter of the *Bowu zhi*, Zhang Hua explains that he prepared this summary in order to “present what has been omitted [in other texts], sketch out faraway places, lay out the positions and images of mountains and watercourses, as well as that which prognosticate the auspicious and inauspicious [affairs]” 出所不見，粗言遠方，陳山川位象，吉凶有徵。<sup>32</sup>

The “positions and images” refer not to physical locations and appearances of concrete geographical items in this context, but to the

<sup>29</sup> See “Za” (Miscellaneous) category of the “Bibliographical Treatise” of the *Sui shu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 34.1006–10.

<sup>30</sup> Here I adopt David R. Knechtges’ translation of the title. See David R. Knechtges and Taiping Chang, eds., *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide Part One* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 50. Zhang Hua himself was closely associated with the term *bowu*; his contemporary did not hesitate to claim, “There is nothing that he did not know” 無物不知. See Yang Chang’s 楊暢 (d. 330) *Jin zhugong zan* 晉諸公贊, cited in Pei Songzhi’s commentary on *Sanguozhi*, 22. 653. There are numerous accounts in Zhang Hua’s biography in the *Jin shu* demonstrating

Zhang Hua’s extraordinary knowledge of things. See *Jin shu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 36.1068–76.

<sup>31</sup> See Roger Greatrex, “Bowu zhi 博物志,” *Early Medieval Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*, eds. Cynthia L. Chennault et al. (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2015), 32–38. See also Knechtges and Chang, *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature*, 50–52. Roger Greatrex, *The Bowu Zhi: An Annotated Translation* (Stockholm: Skrifter utgivna av Foringer für Orientaliska Studier, 20, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> See Fan Ning 范寧, ed. and comm., *Bowu zhi jiaozheng* 博物志校證 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 1.7.

“line position” of *Yi jing* hexagrams and the “images” that hexagram represent, two concepts that figure prominently in Wang Bi’s 王弼 (226–249) *Yi jing* exegesis.<sup>33</sup> In other words, the “positions and images” consist in inherently designated value judgments derived from the human society imposed on the realm of material reality. By the same token, the physical beings or natural phenomena are conceived as foretokens of “auspicious and inauspicious [affairs]” that took place only in human society.

From this we may infer that Zhang Hua concerned himself not so much with putting knowledge of things on ostensible display, but rather, with tracing out a pre-existing value system with which the multitude of things and phenomena can all be accounted for and thereby subjected to one epistemological system. It is with the prospect of such a holistic command of knowledge that Zhang Hua invites and encourages his prospective readers, whom he addresses as “men of *bowu*,” to avail

themselves of his work. He says: “[I hope that] upon reading it, men of *bowu* would find it illuminating [lit. reflect themselves in it/mirror themselves in it]” 博物之士，覽而鑒焉。<sup>34</sup>

The term *bowu*, on this account, represents an intellectual aspiration, an incessant pursuit of ascribing various constituents of the physical realm to a morally-charged and valued-loaded cultural “superstructure” of the society. I propose to translate the term *bowu* in this context as “pan-physical [undertaking],” a term that I coined after the term “metaphysical,” to reflect the new connotation of the term adopted in early medieval period.<sup>35</sup> The semantic shift of the term *bowu* from the “an unimpeded intellect endowed with the ability to know,” primarily associated with sagacious figures of antiquity, to “pan-physical undertaking” that any *bowu* minded men in early medieval China can pursue, is a case of democratization of knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Wang Bi devoted two entries “Elucidating the images” (Ming xiang 明象) and “Analyzing the [line] positions” (Bian wei 辨位) in his *Zhou yi lüeli* 周易略例 (General principles of the Zhou yi) to address these two concepts in detail. Wang Bi defines the term *wei* 位 (positions) as “places ranked as either superior or inferior, abodes suitable for the capabilities with which one is endowed” 夫位列貴賤之地，待才用之宅也。The term *xiang* 象 (images) is understood as the complement to the texts, on which Wang Bi puts “Images are the means to express ideas. Words [i.e. the texts] are the means to explain the images.” Richard John Lynn, trans., *The Classic of Changes: A New Translation of the I Ching as Interpreted by Wang Bi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 31–34.

<sup>34</sup> See Fan Ning, ed. and comm., *Bowuzhi*, 1.7

<sup>35</sup> Recently there has been a renewed interest in tracing a vein of an intellectual outlook named *bowu xue* 博物學 (“pan-physics”) among both transmitted and excavated medieval Chinese texts. See for example, Jiang Xiaoyuan 江曉原, “Zhongguo wenhuazhong de bowuxue chuantong” 中國文化中的博物學傳統, *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao* 6 (2011): 1–4. Yu Xin 余欣, “Zhongguo bowuxue chuantong de chongjian”

中國博物學傳統的重建, *Zhongguo tushu pinglun* 10 (2013): 45–53. For a good discussion about the notion of “*bowu*” in medieval intellectual history see Yu Xin 余欣, *Zhonggu yixiang* 中古異相 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2015), 12–22. In contrast to the scope of metaphysical inquiry, which goes beyond the realm of physical existence of beings, a pan-physical study only concerns itself with the things that are well-situated in the physical reality, and general show no interest in theorizing the knowledge they gathered. This phenomenon perhaps could be related to what Howard Goodman terms as “the emergence of Chinese polymaths.” See Howard L. Goodman, “Chinese Polymaths, 100–300 AD: The Tung-kuan, Taoist Dissent, and Technical Skills,” *Asia Major* 18.1 (2005): 101–74.

<sup>36</sup> The term *bowu* as a synonym for “knowledgeable” or “well-learned” was almost promiscuously applied to character appraisals in the biographical accounts of learned figures of the time. Ban Gu 班固 nominated six such “worthy gentlemen with pan-physical knowledge” in the *Han shu*, Meng Ke 孟軻, Sun Kuang 孫況, Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, Sima Qian 司馬遷, Liu Xiang 劉向, and Yang Xiong 揚雄. See *Han shu*, 36.1972. In addition, Ban Gu uses the term *bowu*

**b.) *Gewu*: From “Coming in Contact with the External World” to “Applying Values on Things”**

While the aspiration of *bowu* takes root in the material reality of early medieval period, it promises of “pan-physical” command of knowledge in general. The intellectual exercise of *gewu* now provides a means to express one’s identity in terms of distinction and hierarchy in early medieval period.

In criticizing the excessive rigidity of the contemporary sumptuary codes, He Qia 和洽 (fl. 190) argued, “For the grand vessel of all under heaven, in assuming his position he does it in consideration with others. It is not advisable to indiscriminately apply the principle of moderation and temperateness. When the principle of moderation and austerity is carried out to an excessive degree, one may still habituate himself to it. But if he uses it to check and rule other things, then his loss might be considerable” 天下大器，在位與人，不可以一節儉也。儉素過中，自以處身則可，以此節格物，所失或多。<sup>37</sup>

Here *gewu* and *chushen* form a clear antithetical pair. Within this antithesis the verb *chu* 處 (locate/ position) is carried out reflexively, toward the self 身 (*shen*); the verb *ge* 格 (approach/ come into contact) is applied to everything apart from oneself, that is, the exterior world/ phenomena (*wu*). The term *chushen* can be taken as “habituate/ orientate

oneself” vis-à-vis the outside world. As a complement, the term *gewu* refers to “come into contact/come to terms with the exterior realm” vis-à-vis oneself.<sup>38</sup>

**Although the World Quickly Changes Form**

Although the world quickly changes form  
Like shapes of clouds,  
all perfected things come home  
to the primeval old.

God of the lyre,  
your ancient song  
soars (despite change and what is gone)  
greater and freer.

Our suffering is never understood,  
nor is love learned,  
and what leads death to drop the gate

on us lies unrevealed.  
Only a song over meadow and wood  
hallows and celebrates.\*

*Sonnets to Orpheus*  
Part I, XIX  
Rainer Maria Rilke\*

This point is well illustrated in the following two occurrences of the term *gewu*. Bing Yuan 邴原 (d. 217) is described as “adamant and unyielding by nature who approached things with elevated criticism” 性剛直，清議以格物；<sup>39</sup> Lu Wan 陸玩 (278–342) is characterized

two times respectively in *Han shu*, 62.2738; 2903. References and allusions to the *bowu* quality became numerous in character appraisals in the biographical accounts in the *Hou Han shu*, and further proliferated in the *Liang shu* 梁書, *Nan shi* 南史, *Bei shi* 北史, and *Jin shu*, as well as in unofficial historical writings.

<sup>37</sup> *Sanguo zhi*, 23.655.

<sup>38</sup> See *Zizhi tongjian*, 66.2099. Rafe De Crespigny, trans., *To Establish Peace: Being the Chronicle of Later Han for the Years 189 to 220 AD as Recorded in Chapters 59 to 69 of the Zizhi tongjian of Sima Guang*,

Vol. Two (Canberra: Australian National University, 1996), 408.

\*Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, trans. by Willis Barnstone (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2004), 139.

<sup>39</sup> The term *qingyi* 清議 (elevated criticism; literally “pure criticism”) refers to the intellectual exercise of passing judgment on subjects of contemporary relevance. The passage is cited in Pei Songzhi’s commentary on the *Sanguo zhi*, 11.354. Also see Liu

as someone “with capacious and refined intelligence, who refrained from approaching things from the perspective of fame and position” 性通雅，不以名位格物。<sup>40</sup> In both cases, the idiosyncratic way that one approaches the exterior world is in compliance with his respective dispositions and is in proportion to his intellectual aptitude.

The connotation of the word *ge* in *gewu* could perhaps be further specified by the term *geyi* 格義, referring to a method of translation and exegesis seeking to introduce and interpret Buddhist concepts by drawing from existing indigenous Chinese thoughts.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the *ge* of *geyi* can be teased out so as to mean “to approach the meaning [target] concepts, *yi*, with the existing frame of reference.” This method was a product of close interaction between Buddhist and Daoist thought during the incipency of Buddhism in China in the early medieval period.

By the late medieval period, the term *gewu* was further qualified, with a special emphasis on the “propriety” in one’s engagement with the exterior world. This new development most likely accounts for *zheng* 正 (rectify) as one of the established glosses for the word *ge* (correct) itself.<sup>42</sup> *Gewu* with this nuance refers to properly engaging with the exterior world in a socially sanctified manner, rather than “in whichever way one sees fit,” as shown in earlier examples.

Zhili 劉治立, ed. and comm., *Fuzi pingzhu* 傅子評註 (Tianjin: Tianjin guji chubanshe, 2010), 193–94.

<sup>40</sup> *Jin shu*, 77.2026.

<sup>41</sup> See Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 319.

<sup>42</sup> This semantic shift derives from *zheng* 正 a well-attested gloss for the word *ge*. The word *ge* in the sense of *zheng* is well attested in early texts. For example, see *Mengzi zhushu* 孟子注疏, *Shisanjing zhushu*,

This semantic shift is evident in the following edict issued by Emperor Wenzong of Tang (r. 827–840), where he speaks apologetically of his deeply troubled reign. It reads: “[I] wish to bring peace and harmony to the populace, and that the era would be without adversity and calamity. But I truly have failed to approach the matter properly (i.e. rule or rectify things), which renders me culpable in the face of heaven.” 將欲俗致和平，時無殃咎。然誠未格物，謫見於天。<sup>43</sup> It is in this sense, *gewu* can be rendered “applying a conceptual grid to the exterior realm” or “bringing the exterior realm to pattern.”<sup>44</sup>

## 5. Towards a Closely Correlated Explanatory System

Both *gewu* and *bowu* are bequests of the Chinese “Axial Age” where the dichotomy between the self and the rest of the existence started to take shape. They represent two separate intellectual endeavors, both of which subject the existing world to introspective review: the former refers to the intellectual capability to acquire extensive knowledge of the exterior realm, and the latter pertains to an engagement with the exterior world according to one’s own intellectual inclination, at the same time, in keeping with the social convention.

Each of these two terms underwent subtle but meaningful changes since the fall of Han. The reference of *bowu* shifts from an abstract sagacious outlook that encompasses the

4A/20: “The great man alone can rectify the impropriety in the lord’s heart” 惟大人為能格君心之非, where Zhao Qi glosses the word *ge* as *zheng*.

<sup>43</sup> See *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 17B.568.

<sup>44</sup> Here I adopt Andrew Plaks translation of the term. For Plaks’ discussion of the term in the *Li ji*, see Plaks, *Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung* (Penguin Books, 2003), 110–11. See also Plaks, “Gewu zhizhi,” 226–27.

totality of the exterior world to an intellectual aspiration for a competent grasp of the world. The term *gewu* gradually narrowed over time and eventually committed itself to designate the application of “the one and only correct” frame of reference to approach the rest of existence.

In the early medieval period, both *bowu* and *gewu*, while taking root in the soil of the material reality of the world, displayed a palpable inclination to become introspectively aware of the existing cultural paradigm, the “superstructure,” that is built on the basis of a shared way of reading and interpreting a body of texts.<sup>45</sup> A coordination between these two intellectual undertakings facilitates a closely knit explanatory system that sorts out and accounts for *wu*, constituents of the material realm below, both in terms of and in accord with the “superstructure” above. The way in which such correlation is established and taken as a given can be attested to in the following two cases.

**a.) The Case of the “White-Feathered Crow” (*baiwu* 白鳥)**

In the early years of the Jianyuan reign (479–482)...One day he [Fan Yun] was having an audience with Emperor Gao [of Qi], it so happened that someone presented a white-feathered crow to the court. When the emperor asked what kind of auspice it was, [Fan] Yun, who was in a lower status, was the last one to reply. He said, “I have heard the when the sovereign reveres the ancestral temple, a white crow would appear.” At that time the ceremony of paying respect to the ancestral temple had just concluded. The emperor said, “What

you have said makes good sense. The guiding structure of corresponding resonance has manifested itself in this.”<sup>46</sup>

齊建元初...時進見齊高帝, 值有獻白鳥者, 帝問此爲何瑞? 雲位卑, 最後答曰: “臣聞王者敬宗廟, 則白鳥至。” 時謁廟始畢. 帝曰: “卿言是也. 感應之理, 一至此乎.”

Fan Yun’s 范雲 (451–503) offhand answer entails a clear correlation between the appearance of the white-feathered crow, a phenomenon observable in the material reality, and the sovereign’s proper behavior, something derived from the cultural superstructure. This “pan-physical” knowledge is first attested in Xue Cong’s 薛琮 (d. 243) “Baiwu song” 白鳥頌 (A Eulogy for the White-Feathered Crow).

粲焉白鳥, How candent, the white-feathered crows;

皓體如素. Their gleaming white appearance looks like fine silk.

宗廟致敬, Only when the ancestral temple is respectfully attended to,

乃胥來顧. Do they present themselves.<sup>47</sup>

The rationale behind the correspondence might have been derived from Xu Shen’s 許慎 (40–121, alt. dates 67–148; 30–124; 58–147) dictionary titled *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, where he refers to *wu* as the “filial bird”

<sup>45</sup> Here I borrowed David Olsen’s definition of “textual community,” see David R. Olsen, *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 273.

<sup>46</sup> See *Liang shu* 梁書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1973), 13.230.

<sup>47</sup> Only a few line of the piece are extant, see *Chuxueji*, 30.733; *Taiping yulan*, 920.26a.

(*xiaoniao* 孝鳥).<sup>48</sup> It is filial devotion, a moral quality that on the one hand the crow is endowed with, and on the other hand traditionally put on display via a well-maintained ancestral temple, that serves as the nexus between the bird and the ancestral temple.

But it seems that the filial devotion with which the crow is bestowed might have been misconstrued in the first place. Zhang Yongyan 張永言 speculates that the seemingly nonsensical “filial” gloss could have been derived from its synonym, *ci* 茲 / 慈 “compassion or compassionate,” which in turn might have been confused with *zi* 茲 “dark, black” due to the similarity between the two graphs.<sup>49</sup> Thus, in the cultural discourse, the crow loses its primary physical attribute and adopts a human moral attribute that came to be associated with it only by the stroke of a character.

The earliest extant mention of the white-feathered crow is in a story excerpted from a pre-Han collection of the lore of Prince Dan of Yan.<sup>50</sup> In the story, the Lord of Qin was determined to detain Dan at the Qin court as a hostage and said that he would let Dan go only when “crows’ heads turn white and horses grow horns” 烏頭白，馬生角。Upon hearing this, Dan heaved a heavy sigh in despair, and at that point we are told, “the crow immediately turned white and the horse grew horns” 烏即頭白，馬即生角。Thus, Dan was

freed.

It has been observed that anomalous creatures were cast on Shang and Zhou bronze vessels used in ceremonies to “represent nature spirits summoned or invoked” during the ceremonies.<sup>51</sup> It was with the same underlying rationale that the story indicates the presence of an overarching divine power through “white-headed crows” and “horses-turned-unicorns.” Given such indicative power of the anomalous creatures, it is only natural that their presence would be regarded as auspicious. Records of the white-feathered crow, one of the unmistakable auspicious omens, at times appear in Han texts, though no specific correlation was attributed to it at this point.<sup>52</sup>

We may surmise that at some point between the second and third centuries, the knowledge about the auspicious portent of the white-feathered crow converges with the misplaced belief that crows are filially devoted. Thus, the correlation the white-feathered crow and well-maintained ancestral temples. It is unlikely that Fan Yun and his contemporaries would be aware of, or, indeed, would have been interested in any part of this line of reasoning. What was expected of a learned scholar of the time was to know how a given phenomenon is to be related to the cultural superstructure and to be interpreted accordingly. As far as the white-feathered crow is concerned, Fan Yun’s offhand reply hit the right mark in confirming that 1) it is an auspicious omen verifying that ancestral temples are well-tended, and thus 2) the filial devotion of the ruling house is in

<sup>48</sup> See Duan Yucai 段玉裁, ed. and comm., *Shuowen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 (1981; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 2014), 4A.56a.

<sup>49</sup> See Zhang Yongyan 張永言, “Guanyu ci de ‘neibu xingshi’” 關於詞的内部形式, *Yuyan yanjiu* (1981): 9–14; 82.

<sup>50</sup> See *Yan Danzi* 燕丹子 cited in *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (1935; rpt. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959), 896.8a.

<sup>51</sup> For a detailed discussion of the iconography of auspicious omens, refer to Tiziana Lippiello, *Auspicious Omens and Miracles in Ancient China: Han, Three Kingdoms, and Six Dynasties* (Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica Institute, 2001), 66–85.

<sup>52</sup> Records of the white-feathered crow as one of a variety of auspicious tokens at times appear in Han texts See *Han shu*, *Dongguan Han ji* 東觀漢紀, *Shang shu zhonghou* 尚書中侯, and *Xiao jing yuan shenqi* 孝經援神契.

proper public display.

The entire chain of correlation between observable phenomenon (white-feathered crow) and moral ideal (filial devotion) and prescribed public performance (showing deference to the ancestral temple), both derived from the same cultural superstructure, forms a self-contained explanatory system. Any inquiries concerning the phenomenon itself would be redirected to the supernatural level of the correlation, and thus firmly locked within the explanatory system. Thus once established, the correlation is there to last.<sup>53</sup>

### b.) The Case of “the White-Forehead” (*baiti* 白題)

When envoys from Baiti 白題 and Huaguo 滑國 came to pay homage to the Liang court in 526, Pei Ziyè 裴子野 (469–530) was the only one at the court who was able to trace the names in historical sources.<sup>54</sup> Pei was praised for being well-informed (*boshi* 博識) and was subsequently commissioned to compile the *Fangguo shi tu* 方國使圖 (Portraits of envoys from states of the four quarters).<sup>55</sup> Pei Ziyè’s

identifications of Baiti and Huaguo, however, simply fail to be informative according to our modern mind. With regard to the former, he cites the *Han shu* recording that Guan Ying, a Western Han general, once decapitated a Baiti general; as for the latter, all he had to offer was that the Hua people submitted to the Han court and joined forces with the Han army led by Marquis of Dingyuan against the Xiongnu king in that region in 126.<sup>56</sup>

This anecdote resonates with a story about Confucius intended to show Confucius’ intellectual prowess. During Confucius’ sojourn in Chen, the Lord of Chen sent an envoy to inquire from him about an ancient arrow that he came across. With great confidence, Confucius identified it as the arrow that was presented by the Sushen 肅慎 Clan as a tributary gift when King Wu of Shang conquered the Shang, which the envoy later verified in a written document.<sup>57</sup>

Both Confucius and Pei Ziyè seem to have managed to impress people with their broad knowledge using as little knowledge as possible. Pei Ziyè pulled it off by citing a few lines from historical texts. The information

<sup>53</sup> In this case, we note that Fan Yun’s pronouncement was first reiterated in the “Furui zhi” 符瑞志 of the *Song shu*. See *Song shu*, 29.841. Then in 791, Linghu Chu 令狐楚 (766–837) submitted a congratulatory petition to the throne where he cites the auspicious correspondence between the white-feathered crow and the imperial temple. See *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 539.15a–b. As late as the fifteenth century, when two white-feathered crows were presented to the Ming court, Xia Yuanji 夏原吉 (1366–1430), a court official, composed “Ruiying bai wu” 瑞應白鳥 (The auspicious correspondence of the white-feathered crow) revoking the long-established correlation tradition. See *Xia Yuanji ji* 夏原吉集, *Siku quanshu*, 1.10a–12a.

<sup>54</sup> *Liang shu*, 30.443; *Nan shi* 南史 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 33.866. Baiti has been tentatively identified with Betik, roughly located on west bank of the Amu Darya. See Feng Chengjun 馮承鈞, *Xiyu diming* 西域地名 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982),

14–15. Huaguo has been conventionally identified with Hephthalites (alt. Ephthalites), also known as Yeda 嚙哒. See for example Enoki, K. “The Liang shih-kung-t’u on the origin and migration of the Hua or Ephthalites,” 7:1–2 (1970) *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*: 37–45. See also Feng Chengjun, *Xiyu diming*, 26.

<sup>55</sup> *Liang shu*, 30.443; *Nan shi*, 33.866.

<sup>56</sup> Pei Ziyè probably mistook Ban Yong 班勇 (d. 127), Ban Chao’s 班超 (32–102) son, for Ban Chao, the Marquis of Dingyuan. It was Ban Yong who led the surrendered Turfan troops to attack the Xiongnu king in 126. See *Hou Han shu*, 88.2912.

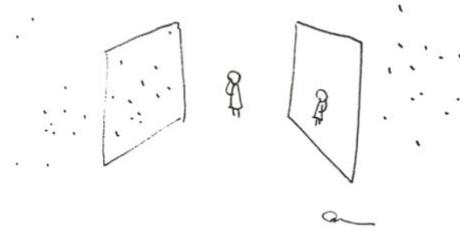
<sup>57</sup> It is recorded both in the *Guo yu* 國語 and the “Bian wu” 辨物 (Discerning things) chapter of the *Shuo yuan* 說苑. See *Guo yu* 國語 (Shanghai: Jiangsu guji chubanshe, 1978), 5.214–16; Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯, ed. and comm., *Shuo yuan jiaozheng* 說苑校正 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 18.463–64.

about the Sushen people that Confucius provided is limited to their presumed tributary relation with the Zhou court. We are left in the dark about who those non-Chinese people were, where they lived, what language they spoke, or how their society was organized. What these two accounts reveal is that being intellectually capable has less to do with the breadth and depth of one's knowledge about an isolated, mostly unheard of item (*wu*) itself, but was more contingent upon how competently one is able to retrieve the correlation between the subject at hand and the value projected from the "superstructure."

In both cases, the relevance of those non-Chinese people lies exclusively in their submission and tributary capacity. In referring to Sushen in the context of King Wu's military triumph over the Shang, Confucius effectively put the Sushen people in a conceptual correlation with that of "foreign domains that swore allegiance and paid tribute to the Zhou court." Likewise, Pei Ziye evoked the cultural memory of the Hua and Baiti people being subjugated by and submitting to the Han court respectively, and thereby referred them back to a reassuringly familiar concept of "tribute bearers" in the superstructure.

Both cases of the "white-feathered crow" and "the white-forehead" illustrate how the coordination between *bowu* and *gewu* worked towards confirming an explanatory system that correlated tangible objects or observable phenomena with cultural ideals, beliefs, morality, or ritual, areas belong to the "superstructure." The explanatory system, governed by the existing superstructure, in turn, encompasses an orderly world below in its comprehensive, structured organization of things and ideas. "Knowing" in early medieval China has never been acquiring "what there is to know about something" in ways that would be deemed sound in rationalist epistemology, but instead entailed approaching the given

subject via a closed-off correlation that is sanctified by the explanatory system. During a period when the cultural legacy had become diffuse and multiform, this freshly conceived explanatory system was a means by which intellectuals of the time anchored themselves to the realm of knowledge.



These two cases also reveal the tenacity of the correlation between the subject and its supernatural implication in a full-fledged explanatory system. The associations between the "white-feathered crow" with the imperial family's filial devotion and the non-Chinese people with the alleged tributary system are both firmly locked into the explanatory system. There was no known attempt to dislodge individual ties from the overall correlation and subject them to critical analysis. As long as the "superstructure" remains unwavering, the correlations would be habitually taken as an intrinsic part of the shared cultural experience and left untouched.

\*\*\*

This last point has a particularly profound bearing on the matter of cultural continuity mentioned in the beginning of this paper. In spite of the political disunity following the fall of the Han empire, the cultural "superstructure" remains stable through the early medieval period owing to an established textual tradition, from which moral ideals, briefs and values, behavioral codes, ritual, and institutional structure can be derived. This superstructure is sustained by an explanatory system that can

withhold changes taking place in the way in which men perceived and engage with the exterior world. Coordination between *bowu* and *gewu*, by formulating a self-sufficient and enclosed correlation between the material realm and the superstructure, is geared to fashion such an explanatory system. This development mainly took place in the early medieval period and eventually set the course of the Chinese intellectual history further apart from that of the West, after a brief moment of parallelism, when Liu Xiang and his counterparts in the Library of Alexandria each set out to establish a classical textual tradition.

In his closing observation of knowledge, thought and belief before the seventh century CE, Ge Zhaoguang notes that three forms of textual activities, namely, classical exegeses, compilations of bibliographical catalogues, and *leishu* 類書 literally “classified compendium,” together gave the final shape to an evolving intellectual landscape in the seventh century.<sup>58</sup> Each of the three forms can be seen as an embodiment of a cumulative line of thought of the intellects operating entirely on the basis of a pre-existing frame of reference.

In the final analysis, on the one hand, a respected and robust textual tradition, established in the early imperial period, continuously sustained the cultural “superstructure” which oversees the culture to be handed down without ideological interruption. On the other hand, it is to the credit of a well-anchored explanatory system, with the correlative thinking inbuilt in its core, that this continuity is being “materialized.”

An overall pursuit of a holistic and integrated world-view, however, is not without a price.

A.C. Graham, for example, links the prevailing correlative thinking with the lack of momentum for analytical thinking to thrive in imperial China.<sup>59</sup> Likewise Li Quanmin 酈全民 points out that the availability and versatility of the existing explanatory system dampen the keenness to subject individual time to critical review and thus further thwarted the development of scientific reasoning altogether.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> See Ge Zhaoguang, *An Intellectual History of China*, 369–78.

<sup>59</sup> Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 313–29.

<sup>60</sup> Li Quanmin 酈全民, “Zhongguo chuantong zhishi shengcheng he chuancheng de renzhi quxiang” 中國傳統知識生成和傳承的認知取向, *Huadong shifan daxue xuebao* 46:1 (2014): 27–32.